Prisoners of War

Thru the Ages

A **prisoner of war** (**POW**) is a person who is held captive by a belligerent power during or immediately after an armed conflict. The earliest recorded usage of the phrase "prisoner of war" dates back to 1610.[1]

Treatment of POWs varies from conflict to conflict with belligerent powers. We'll take a look at how treatment and repatriation was handled.

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prisoner_of_war

Warfare and conduct has changed much since early Colonial times. There was a time when Prisoners were exchanged after a period of time. Over time, attitudes changed, warfare changed, the cost of taking care of POWs changed depending upon how well the belligerents were doing during the war.

Later (1864) a formal set of international treaties called the Geneva Convention[1] attempted to provide how care and treatment of POWs were to be conducted by belligerents. The Geneva Convention would be modified and adopted several times.

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva_Conventions

Revolutionary War

According to the Mount Vernon Library[1], treatment of POWs had not been codified into law. Treatment varied because the British considered the uprising an internal affair. While European Governments treated prisoners differently and sometimes with catastrophic results because of lack of food, sanitary conditions, or indifference toward prisoners. Old ships were turned into prisons. Neither the British Empire or the Revolutionaries had considered the number prisoners that might be captured.

Complicating things were if prisoners were labeled rebels or traitors leading to inconsistent treatment on both sides. By 1782, negotiations recognized American Officers on equal terms as their British counterparts.

1: https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/prisoners-of-war/

Revolutionary War POW Lists.

National Archives and Records Administration
https://www.archives.gov/files/research/military/american-revolution/prisoners-1776-1783.pdf

FamilySearch: ***Revolutionary War, 1774-1783*** *(scroll down the page)*
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Military_Online_Genealogy_Records

Cyndi's List: Prisoners of the Revolutionary War
http://www.americanwars.org/american-prisoners-revolution.htm

American Wars
http://www.americanwars.org/american-prisoners-revolution.htm

War of 1812

Typically, Officers were treated better than the enlisted prisoners. Great Britain transferred most of their prisoners to Ontario while the US kept the British prisoners deep inside the US territory.

Swaps were made with prisoners pledging not to re-engage in hostilities.

National Archives maintains roles of prisoners of war.
https://www.archives.gov/files/dc-metro/know-your-records/genealogy-fair/2012/handouts/war-of-1812-american-pows.pdf

Canadian Archives has prisoner lists.
http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/explore/online/1812/prisoners.aspx

Other Resources:
https://microform.digital/boa/collections/58/prison-ship-records-from-the-war-of-1812

https://www.1812privateers.org/United_States/POW.htm

https://www.genealogycenter.info/military/warof1812/search_americanpows.php

Native American and US/Mexican Wars

During colonization and later conflicts, Native Americans culture depicted how prisoners were treated. Those Europeans who escaped or were ransomed, detailed how prisoners were treated. It was biased but treatment did vary from tribe to tribe.

Wikipedia:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Captives_in_American_Indian_Wars

US Army Center of Military History
https://history.army.mil/html/reference/army_flag/iw.html

The US-Mexican War only lasted a couple of years. American prisoners captured by Mexico were treated fairly and humanly. Not much is known about their accounts.
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/US_Mexican_War_Prisoner_of_War_Records

Civil War

The Civil War brought about an unexpected large numbers of POWs. Neither the Union or Confederates were ready for the large numbers of soldiers captured. Consequently, conditions at POW camps deteriorated with unsanitary conditions, poor food, and disease taking a toll on prisoners. Prisoner swaps continued until 1864 when General Grant stopped them because the confederate prisoners were returning to fight against the Union. General Grant reasoned prisoner swaps were only delaying the war's end.

American Battlefield Trust – Civil War Prison Camps
https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/civil-war-prison-camps

Wikipedia – Civil War Prison Camps
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War_prison_camps

National Park Service – Civil War in the National Parks
https://www.nps.gov/ande/learn/historyculture/civil-war-prisons-in-the-national-parks.htm

Library of Congress – Civil War Diary
https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2017/05/civil-war-diary-this-hell-upon-earth-of-a-prison/

Spanish American War

Spanish-American War
The Spanish-American War only lasted for three months and less than a dozen Americans became prisoners of war. These POWs were exchanged in about six weeks. By contrast, United States soldiers captured approximately 150,000 prisoners. - https://www.nps.gov/ande/learn/historyculture/pow_synopsis.htm#:~:text=The%20Spanish-American%20War%20only,soldiers%20captured%20approximately%20150%2C000%20prisoners.

The Spanish-American Centennial Website

https://www.spanamwar.com/Spanishprisonersnh.html

Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Spanish–American_War_prisoners_of_war_held_by_Spain

Geneva Convention

The **Geneva Conventions** are four treaties, and three additional protocols, that establish international legal standards for humanitarian treatment in war. The singular term *Geneva Convention* usually denotes the agreements of 1949, negotiated in the aftermath of the Second World War (1939–1945), which updated the terms of the two 1929 treaties and added two new conventions. The Geneva Conventions extensively define the basic rights of wartime prisoners, civilians and military personnel, established protections for the wounded and sick, and provided protections for the civilians in and around a war-zone.[1]

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva_Conventions

World War I

During U. S involvement in World War I (1917 and 1918), approximately 4,120 Americans were held as prisoners of war and there were 147 confirmed deaths. Rules for the fair treatment of POWs had been set in place some years earlier. Still, each prisoner of war had to face days without enough to eat or without adequate clothing. There was also the uncertainty of tomorrow and the loss of freedom.[1]

1. https://www.nps.gov/ande/learn/historyculture/pow_synopsis.htm

World War 1 Continued

Great Britain – Various articles about prisoners of war
https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/prisoners-of-war

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Historical Archives
https://grandeguerre.icrc.org/

Library of Congress
https://www.loc.gov/collections/veterans-history-project-collection/serving-our-voices/diverse-experiences-in-service/prisoners-of-war/pows-in-germany/

National Archive – Search “Prisoners of War WW1”
https://search.archives.gov/search?affiliate=national-archives&sort_by=&query=Prisoners+of+war+WW1

World War 2

Library of Congress – POWs in Germany
https://www.loc.gov/collections/veterans-history-project-collection/serving-our-voices/diverse-experiences-in-service/prisoners-of-war/pows-in-germany/

National WW2 Museum
https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/topics/prisoners-world-war-ii-pows

Imperial War Museum – What life was like for POWs
https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-life-was-like-for-pows-in-europe-during-the-second-world-war

Family Search – US WW2 POW records
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_World_War_II_Prisoner_of_War_Records

National Archives – Access to Archival Databases (aad)
https://aad.archives.gov/aad

Mapping POW camps in Japan
https://manoa.hawaii.edu/wcdi/projects/mapping-pow-camps/

Korean War

Britannica – Battling over POWs
https://www.britannica.com/event/Korean-War/Battling-over-POWs

RAND Cooperation – The Korean War (POW/MIA) Issues
https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/2006/MR351.1.pdf

Fold3 (Ancestry.com)
https://www.fold3.com/collection/korean-war

American Legion – POW stories
https://www.legion.org/honor/koreanwarpow

National Archives – The Korean War
https://www.archives.gov/research/military/korean-war/electronic-records

FamilySearch – The Korean War
https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2043777?collectionNameFilter=true

Vietnam, Iraq, and beyond

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._prisoners_of_war_during_the_Vietnam_War

https://www.pritzkermilitary.org/explore/vietnam-war/pows-vietnam

https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vietnam-War-POWs-and-MIAs-2051428

https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/treatment-american-pows-north-vietnam

https://www.oah.org/tah/latine-history/vietnam-war-pows-their-unsettled-legacy-at-fifty-years/

https://americanhistory.si.edu/price-of-freedom/vietnam/american-pows-vietnam

https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/honor-pow-prisons-north-vietnam/

https://www.vietnamwar50th.com/assets/1/7/VW50th_POW_Posters_7-10-19.pdf

https://dpaa-mil.sites.crmforce.mil/dpaaFamWebVietnam

Vietnam, Iraq, and beyond

https://memory.loc.gov/pow/powhome.html

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_prisoners_of_war_in_the_2003_invasion_of_Iraq

https://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=123740&page=1

https://www.cnn.com/2013/10/30/world/pow-and-mia-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-fast-facts/index.html

https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/05/why-there-are-so-few-pows-from-todays-wars/371951/

https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/American_POWs_in_the_2003_invasion_of_Iraq

https://www.pownetwork.org/gulf/index_gulf_war.htm

https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34608645/

Other Resources

Ancestry: https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog/?keyword=Prisoners%20of%20War

Cyndi's List: https://www.cyndislist.com/us/

Family Search

https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/4459223

Do a search on the Family Tree Wiki (Prisoners of War) https://www.wikitree.com/

Library of Congress: https://www.loc.gov/collections/veterans-history-project-collection/?q=Prisoners+of+War&st=gallery

Internet Archive: https://archive.org/search?query=Prisoners+of+War

Albuquerque Library Resources

Online Resources available from anywhere with your Library Card

Fold3 History & Genealogy Archives

Formerly known as Footnote. Searchable digitized images of millions of historical primary documents relating to the Revolutionary War, Civil War, WWI, WWII, U.S. Presidents, historical newspapers and naturalization documents, many from the National Archives.

Heritage Quest Online

HeritageQuest Online is a comprehensive treasury of American genealogical sources —rich in unique primary sources, local and family histories, and finding aids.

Historical Newspapers: New Mexico Collection

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New Mexico Collection empowers researchers to digitally travel back through centuries to become eyewitnesses to local and regional history. Each title includes the complete paper, cover-to-cover, with full-page images in easily downloadable PDF format.

MyHeritage Library Edition

MyHeritage Library Edition is one of the largest, most internationally diverse genealogy databases of its kind. This resources provides access to billions of historical documents, millions of historical photos and other resources in thousands of databases that span the past five centuries.

Albuquerque Library Resources

Available online with a library card